

Be On The Lookout For Donation Scams Following Natural Disasters

When natural disasters strike, giving a monetary donation is usually the best way to help victims recover. Relief organizations can use cash donations to procure specific items for survivors based on need. Public donations of materials without specifically being requested can also be a severe burden to emergency management officials because they must plan for the collection, storage, transport and distribution of the materials often before a need for specific items has been identified. Before giving a donation, however, take care to ensure that your money will actually go to those in need.

Scam artists are opportunistic so expect charity scams following natural disasters.

Make sure you are giving your donation to a legitimate charity.

- If the charity has either an unfamiliar name or a name that sounds similar to another well-known organization, do some research before giving any money;
- Be wary if the charity refuses to provide documentation of their 501(c)3 non-profit status or other identifying information such as a mailing address or website. If you give a large contribution or frequent contributions, ask for the organization's annual report and financial statements. This will give you an idea of what the organization is currently doing with your and other people's money
- Charities that solicit donations in Maryland must be registered with the Maryland Secretary of State. To find out if a charity is registered, go to:
<http://www.sos.state.md.us/Charity/CharityHome.aspx>.
- Check on the charity's reputation using sites like Charity Navigator and GiveWell.org, which rank charities based on efficiency, transparency and accountability.
- Ask whether the person calling you represents the charity itself or a professional fundraising company. If the caller represents a professional fundraising company, be sure to ask how much of each donation they collect for "administrative costs" or "overhead." It is not uncommon for such companies to take 80% or more of every donation for these fees.

Don't be pressured to make a donation immediately or provide sensitive personal information.

Legitimate charities give donors as much time as they need. Remember, the cause will be just as worthy tomorrow as it is today. Be wary if you are asked to give your donation in cash or via wire transfer;

Be wary of solicitations that promise sweepstakes winnings or other prizes if you donate.

Ask how any information you provide will be used. Many organizations continue to contact donors after a donation and may sell or rent your contact information to other organizations. If

you are frequently contacted by organizations you do not wish to donate to, ask them to put your name on a “Do Not Call” list.

Keep track of your contribution(s) so you can put them down as tax deductions..

To obtain this factsheet in an alternative format, please contact the Office of Consumer Affairs at 410-313-6420(voice/relay) or email us at consumer@howardcountymd.gov